

Ed Meyer Interview 1/10/02

DNR: When did you start with the Iowa Conservation Commission?

Ed: I started my first work in 1926 at Ledges. My folks owned a farm next door and they needed help, I was available for a regular job for eight months of the summer. Another thing that helped was they needed transportation. My dad let me take a team and wagon down one a month. There were a couple weeks we had to haul some stone or some wood. We used a team of horses, a wheel barrel, spades and shovels. The first three years I worked eight months a year. In 32 during the bad depression I had a man work with me. We got 65 dollars a month and we lived off of \$32.50/month. I worked six years for 25 cents per hour. When I had my first appointment for a conservation officer in 1939. Had me go to Palacade Park in Winterset, and I received \$75 per month until that June. Then the chief of lands and waters came and visited me. I asked if there was any chance you could pay me a little extra? He said, were going to pay you \$80/month. Five dollars extra. Things were rough.

DNR: Where did you go from Pammel then?

Ed: I went to Lake Aquabi in August 1942. Due to its ideal location, 30 miles and five counties down soon became the most visited State Park in Iowa. Stayed there for a long time. There was no lakes close. When I was at the ledges in 1939, Ledges was the highest attended State Park in Iowa. People wanted water and they wanted to use boats and swim.

DNR: Did you retire at Lake Aquabi?

Ed: No, I was there for 21 years. The job was big and the office felt I was doing well. It was general policy they were changing men every five years. They made the exception to leave me there for a little over twenty. They decided that wanted to transfer me to Beeds Lake, near Hampton in Franklin County. I was there for 7 and ½ years. The last few years they transferred me to Union Park, Near Gladbrook. I retired May 1972, after 46 years with the park. I gave a short talk at my retirement meeting. I said, "During my lifetime I have seen this great program mushroom. I confident that this great program is going to continue to move forward. With those great accomplishment the people of Iowa 2 and ¾ million of them certainly have a finer state to live and a must greater place than once was.

DNR: This past year Mil Hahn celebrated 50 years for working for the state and you hired him in 1951.

Ed: He had just worked about a month he was released to go to Korea War. It was understood that when he returned from the war he would get his job back. He was in 24 months; he came back and worked for me until 1956 where he went on to work at Red Haw till 1961. He was there for five years and then transferred to Clear Lake for another four years and was transferred to Lake McBride as a carpenter where he still works. In my lifetime I had 53 different people work for me at Lake Aquabi.

DNR: What did you do before working for the state?

Ed: I worked with my dad on the farm when I was 18.

DNR: You graduated from high school at that point?

Ed: No, I never had more than an eight-grade education.

DNR: What kind of tools did you have when working at Ledges and other state parks?

Ed: Just hand tools, wheelbarrow, and spades and shovels and such things. Ledges was the first park to have a truck. It would haul only a few garbage cans and tools. In 1926 things started to expand. They added a road through the park and a log cabin. In 1926 they built a new log lodge and a small cabin that would be the park office. Some of the logs came from the park and some came from the neighbor's place.

DNR: You were hired by Carl Henning? Is that correct?

Ed: He was the park man. He was one of the first three park men hired; the other two were at backbone. A year or two later they put a man at Dolliver. Then they had a man at Pilot Knob one over at Pammel and things kept expanding out.

DNR: Did you work with horses?

Ed: In 1938 when I first started working I had a team.

DNR: What year did you move to Pammel?

Ed: Oct 1939.

DNR: Was there a cabin for you to stay in?

Ed: They had an old farmhouse and an old farm barn with a team of horses. Had a small road maintainer to maintain wood. I cut wood from Walnut state park which was nice because I had all the wood I needed to burn at the house.

DNR: What did you use to cut the wood?

Ed: Axes and a crosscut saw. First chainsaw I had was in 1952. When I moved to Aquabi in 1942 all I had was a worn out pickup and they sent we down a team of horses since I knew horses. In 1946 they purchased six new John Deere tractors like the Highway Commission uses. They would pull a trailer. What they were really good for was a mower. They later decided that the tractor could be of better use somewhere else so they sent off the tractor and I was back to using a team of horses. A few years later they ordered a new Ferguson Tractor and that was a real step up for me. That was the first real tractor out there. It was a sickle type mower.

DNR: The Ferguson TO20's. I still have one of them at Ft. Defiance and some of the Jubilees are still out there.

Ed: Thing just kept getting bigger. The first year I went to Beeds Lake that bought me two mowers.

DNR: Based on when you were working you would have been around during the same time as the CCC. Did you work with the CCC at all?

Ed: When they first started I was at Ledges in 1933. The park men and the two helpers were independent; they had nothing to do with that. But they had big projects and we had the maintenance then.

DNR: They were building some of those bridges at ledges?

Ed: Have you ever been through Ledges?

DNR: I used to work at Ledges.

Ed: Remember that nice footbridge? They had that flood in 1935 that washed it out.

DNR: That particular bridge?

Ed: No that is one of the bridges that didn't wash out.

DNR: Did the CCC build the shelter in the upper and lower levels at Ledges?

Ed: The shelter that they moved. Do you remember that?

DNR: Yes

Ed: They put that stone shelter in down on the flats in 1934. In 1935 they put the shelter in at the wood picnic area. That is also the year they put a well in at.

DNR: Were you involved in the CCC at any park besides ledges?

Ed: No.

DNR: At Ledges where was the CCC camp?

Ed: At east edge of Boone. When they had one at Lake Aquabi at the fair grounds. That all phased out about the time I got my appointment in 1939. The war began to pick up and Hitler was starting to take over things. That was the end of the programs.

DNR: Did the CCC men work long hours?

Ed: The work was limited for all the people. They would spread out the work of two people and made it work for ten people. The only place they would work on is government work. People could hardly get enough work to eat. People in the WPA got \$44/month and supervisors got around \$60/month. The CCC men received a dollar a day for work.

DNR: Was the wood used to build for the shelter brought in or was in cut from the park?

Ed: A lot of the work was brought in. Not much was cut from the park.

DNR: Were you provided with a uniform in the early years at Ledges?

Ed: No, just plain clothes. When I moved to Aquabi it was tan shirts and pants.

DNR: When did they start providing a uniform?

Ed: About 1951 they got the Eisenhower jackets with tan clothing. Then in 1966 when legislator decided to buy shirts, coveralls and jackets.

DNR: Were most of the movings forced on you?

Ed: Most of them moved every five to ten years. Sometimes they would keep you around for longer if you did a good job. About 1947 we put in an old cook stove. Everyone would cook their own meals except when churches would help out cooking when they would hold school sessions for the new people coming into the parks.

DNR: How did the schools work for the new people? Did they bring them in and ask questions?

Ed: I participated. Some of them were fish and game and half were for the parks. I would give talks and take them around and show them how to operate different things.

DNR: What kind of visitor activity did you see (picnicking, camping, etc.)?

Ed: Most were strictly picnicking, but some hiking. The biggest crowds would be in the fall to watch the leaves and look at rock formations.

DNR: Was there a campground when you first started at Aquabi?

Ed: Yes, a really small one just across from the bathhouse. Then we opened up the hill east of the bathhouse a few years later. In 1961 they opened up a new camping area on the north side. In 61 and 62 they had two camping areas and I had to hire an extra man to help out with the campground.

DNR: Did you always charge for camping or was it free?

Ed: We always charged for camping. Campers at Ledges were charged 50 cents per night. If someone wanted to use the old lodge it was 3 dollars. Now it is up to 90 dollars. That job at Aquabi was rough. I had a few people who understood that. Was most of the Activity at Aquabi on the south side of the lake at that time?

Ed: In 1951 they put in that new road on the north side, it was just a service lane before that. They put a big picnicking area back there. Another thing that was rough was digging our own garbage pit by hand the first few years. Then we used a team of horses and then we got a tractor. The job was rough back in the 50's.

DNR: You had one person in each park for help?

Ed: I had two men during most of the summer and one man during the winter, the winter guy was full time. The seven years I was there I was in charge of the campground. I would take time and register the boats.

DNR: How many supervisors were around back then?

Ed: In 1945 there were six that lived in the park who spent two days checking the territory and making sure the work was getting done. In 1951 they changed it to three regular time men. Each worked in separate districts.

DNR: Do you remember who the three were?

Ed: Jack G. in 1962., Joe Eathan in 1965, Wilbur Speck in 1961. In 1929 they hired the first superintendent of parks. Back then they had two divisions, Division of fish and game and Iowa Board of Conservation. In 1935 the Iowa legislator put them together and called it the Iowa Conservation Commission. I had many feelings about my job, but most of all I liked it for one reason. I was my own boss most of the time.

DNR: Did they always have the standard park hours? (Closing at 10:30 pm)

Ed: They started that just before I began at lake Aquabi. In the late 20's they wouldn't hire a park ranger under the age of 45.

DNR: What did you have for law enforcement when you were running Lake Aquabi?

Ed: I had authority to take people in. But that wasn't my nature. I can remember only a few times I had to turn someone in.

DNR: In your time working did you ever have an incident when you felt your life was "in danger"?

Ed: I tangled with a fellow one night about 10:30 when I was getting everyone out of the park. He began to be quite nasty with me, but I told him off pretty good. He came after me like he was going to kill me. I hurried and got into the truck and pulled up to the cabins and he followed right behind me. I called the sheriff and locked the door and the sheriff arrived in 20 minutes but the guy couldn't be found.

DNR: Did many of the people that you worked with go on to have a career with the DNR?

Ed: Very few. I had five people help me plant trees for a month or two, but they would come and go. Some would go on to join the army. The Conservation Commission was generally free of politics, but in 1938 they had a democratic governor. The governor would find you a job if you knew him and were a democrat. He got one guy who had a failing farm who was a democrat got a job because he knew the governor. Bruce Styles was director in around 1959.